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‘A new case, one that my lawyer will have to handle!’

Dostoevskian Echoes in Pirandello’s ‘La Giara’

Alberto Godioli

Dostoevsky in the *Novelle per un anno*

This article will focus on a yet unexplored aspect of Pirandello’s famous short story ‘La giara’ [The Oil Jar, 1909] – namely its structural similarity with Dostoevsky’s ‘The Crocodile’ (1865), which in turn can shed new light on Pirandello’s broader dialogue with Dostoevsky. The present study takes its cue from Elio Gioanola’s 1983 book *Pirandello, la follia*, which highlighted a deep affinity between these two authors, with Dostoevsky being identified as ‘the inventor, for contemporary fiction, of narrative structures able to convey the totality of the neurotic-psychotic opposition’.¹ In other words, in Gioanola’s view, Dostoevsky’s use of polyphony, the lack of a stable authorial perspective on events, and his thematic interest in mental illness reflect a basic tension (‘neurotic-psychotic opposition’) between the Self and the constraints imposed by bourgeois society. A similar discontent with rationalist, post-Enlightenment civilization can, of course, be found in Pirandello; according to Gioanola, both the radical instability inherent to *umorismo* and the importance of madness in Pirandello’s works belong to the tradition of the modern (‘neurotic’) carnivalesque, within which Dostoevsky clearly plays a key role. Despite the methodological flaws underlying Gioanola’s book – especially his abrupt transitions from analyzing literary patterns to psychoanalyzing empirical authors –, his plea for a more systematic investigation of the link between Pirandello and Dostoevsky is definitely convincing; and indeed, one does not need to share Gioanola’s take on psychoanalysis in order to acknowledge Dostoevsky’s centrality as a model for Pirandello. After all, a scene from *Crime and Punishment* is the first literary example chosen by Pirandello to illustrate the difference between ‘avvertimento del contrario’ (awareness of the opposite) and ‘sentimento del contrario’ (feeling of the opposite):

‘Signore, signore! oh! signore, forse, come gli altri, voi stimate ridicolo tutto questo; [...] ma per me non è ridicolo, perché io sento tutto ciò...’ – Così grida Marmeladoff nell’osteria, in *Delitto e Castigo* del Dostojevski, a Raskolnikoff tra le risate degli avventori ubriachi. E questo grido è appunto la protesta dolorosa ed esasperata d’un personaggio umoristico contro chi, di fronte a lui, si ferma a un primo avvertimento superficiale e non riesce a vederne altro che la comicità.²

¹ ‘Dostoevskij è l’inventore, per tutta la letteratura contemporanea, delle strutture narrative atte a veicolare la totalità dell’opposizione nevrotico-psicotica’ (E. Gioanola, *Pirandello, la follia*, Genova, Il Melangolo, 1983, p. 18).

² L. Pirandello, *L’umorismo*, in: idem, *Saggi e interventi*, ed. by F. Taviani, Milano, Mondadori, 2006, p. 912. An exhaustive collection of the direct references to Dostoevsky in Pirandello’s essays can now be

[‘My dear Sir, maybe you find all of this to be ridiculous, like everyone else does; but this isn’t ridiculous to me, because I feel all of it...’ – this is what Marmeladov shouts to Raskolnikov at the tavern, amidst the laughter of drunken costumers, in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. This shout is the painful and embittered protest of a humoristic character, uttered against those who limit themselves to a superficial perception, and only see his comic side.]

Nevertheless, Pirandello’s intertextual dialogue with Dostoevsky still remains largely unexamined, especially when it comes to the *Novelle per un anno* [Short Stories for a Year]. In a 1972 article titled ‘Dostoevskij nella letteratura italiana’, Eurialo De Michelis recognized two probable instances of Dostoevsky’s influence: 1) In ‘Non è una cosa seria’ [It’s not a serious thing] (1910), Perazzetti’s farcical wedding with a mentally impaired woman resembles Stavrogin’s similar stunt in *Demons*; 2) In ‘L’imbecille’ [The imbecile] (1912), the basic structure of the plot (Luca Fazio offering to kill a petty politician before committing suicide) is modelled after Kirillov’s storyline, once again from *Demons*.³ After De Michelis’s article, however, no further progress has been made in the detection of Dostoevskian echoes in Pirandello’s short fiction, with the only exception of Gioanola’s remarks on the similarity between the delusional monologues of Nicola Petix (‘La distruzione dell’uomo’ [The destruction of man], 1921) and Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the list is far from being exhaustive. In ‘La tartaruga’ [The tortoise] (1936), for instance, the protagonist Myshkow has much in common with Myshkin from *The Idiot*; Dostoevsky’s influence here is not limited to the name of Pirandello’s character, but also extends to Myshkow’s ‘inguaribile giovanilità’ [incurable youth], childish naivety, and ‘ignoranza di vita’ [ignorance of life].⁴ Dostoevsky’s hero is famously characterized by the same features, as exemplified by Myshkin’s account of the diagnosis he received from Dr Schneider: ‘He told me that he had come to the conclusion that I was a complete child myself, altogether a child; that it was only in face and figure that I was like a grown-up person, but that in development, in soul, in character, and perhaps in intelligence, I was not grown up, and that so I should remain, if I lived to be sixty’.⁵ The similarities between ‘La tartaruga’ and *The Idiot* confirms the pattern already suggested by the first three instances, as the dialogue between Pirandello and Dostoevsky seems to revolve around characters swinging between eccentricity and psychopathology: Perazzetti, Luca Fazio, Nicola Petix and Myshkow on the one hand; Stavrogin, Kirillov, Raskolnikov, and Myshkin on the other.⁶ In this paper, however, I will address a slightly different case – ‘The Crocodile’ being a satirical short story, apparently quite far from the aspects of Dostoevsky’s fiction that Pirandello seems to be most interested in. Nonetheless, after discussing the yet undetected convergences between ‘La giara’ and ‘The Crocodile’, I will move on to argue how the Dostoevskian echoes once again set the basis for the

found in Pirandello, *Dostoevsky e la polifonia: dal romanzo al teatro, 1890-1936*, ed. by P. Jachia, Lecce, Manni, 2016.

³ E. De Michelis, ‘Dostoevskij nella letteratura italiana’, in: *Lettere italiane*, 2 (1972), p. 188.

⁴ Pirandello, ‘La tartaruga’, in: idem, *Novelle per un anno*, ed. by M. Costanzo, Milano, Mondadori, 1985-1990 (henceforth abbreviated as NA), volume III, p. 746. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Pirandello are mine.

⁵ F. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, transl. by C. Garnett, Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 1996, p. 67. The same concept is repeated several times throughout the novel: “‘You’ve changed very little, indeed, though you were only ten or eleven when I saw you’ (Ivan Petrovich to Myshkin; *ivi*, p. 505); ‘I’m twenty-seven, but I know that I’m like a child’” (*ivi*, p. 517). With regard to the theme of childhood in ‘La tartaruga’, see I. Pupo, ‘Quasi una pietra. Per uno studio variantistico de *La tartaruga*’, in: *Pirandelliana*, 1 (2007), pp. 49-56.

⁶ For a broader discussion of Dostoevsky’s influence on Pirandello’s representation of eccentric characters, cf. A. Godioli, *Laughter from Realism to Modernism: Misfits and Humorists in Pirandello, Svevo, Palazzeschi, and Gadda*, Oxford, Legenda, 2015, pp. 32-39.

development of typically Pirandellian themes, pointing precisely towards what Gioanola would define as a 'neurotic-psychotic' relationship with civilization.

From Ivan Matveich to Zi' Dima

'La giara' (1909) is one of Pirandello's most famous *novelle*; it centres on Zi' Dima, an eccentric repairman who accidentally gets trapped into the terracotta jar he was supposed to fix; the owner (don Lollò) understands that the only way to free him would be by breaking the jar, but will not allow that without a full refund from Dima. In response to that, Dima decides to set up home in the container, and throws an evening party for Lollò's farmers; exasperated by the noise, Don Lollò furiously pushes the jar down a hillside, causing it to break and thus setting Dima free without a refund. A very similar pattern can be found in Dostoevsky's 'The crocodile' (1865), where Ivan Matveitch, a subordinate official, is accidentally swallowed alive by a crocodile at an exhibition in Saint Petersburg's Passage; however, much to their surprise, his wife Elena Ivanovna and the narrator soon find out that Ivan is actually alive and well inside the crocodile's belly. The only way to set Ivan free is by cutting the crocodile open, which the owner (referred to as 'the German') refuses to do without an exorbitant reimbursement:

A perfect Bedlam followed. Elena Ivanovna kept shrieking out the same phrase, as though in a frenzy, "Slice him open! Slice him open!" apparently entreating them – probably in a moment of oblivion – to flay somebody for something [: *a pun based on the double meaning of the verb 'to flay' in Russian*]. The proprietor and Mutter took no notice whatever of either of us; they were both bellowing like calves over the crocodile. [...]

"Cut him open! Cut him! Cut him!" clamoured Elena Ivanovna, clutching at the German's coat. "He did tease the crocodile. For what did your man tease the crocodile?" cried the German, pulling away from her. "You will, if Karlchen wird burst, therefore pay, das war mein Sohn, das war mein einziger Sohn".⁷

While the protagonist 'makes himself comfortable' in the belly of the crocodile, the narrator (a friend of Ivan's) even asks for legal advice, as don Lollò does in Pirandello's text – and in both cases, the ensuing argument sounds absurdly pedantic:

'I think you told me that he made himself fairly comfortable there? [...] As for the German, it's my personal opinion that he is within his rights, and even more so than the other side, because it was the other party who got into his crocodile without asking permission [...]; and a crocodile is private property, and so it is impossible to slit him open without compensation'. ('The Crocodile', p. 114)

L'avvocato allora gli spiegò che erano due casi. Da un canto, lui, Don Lollò, doveva subito liberare il prigioniero per non rispondere di sequestro di persona; dall'altro il conciabrocche doveva rispondere del danno che veniva a cagionare con la sua imperizia o con la sua storditaggine. (NA III, p. 12)

[The lawyer then explained to him that there were two cases. On the one hand, he, Don Lollò, was obliged to release the prisoner at once so as not to be liable to the charge of "illegal confinement"; on the other hand, the tinker was answerable for the damage he was causing through his lack of professionalism and his carelessness.]

The two plots share some clear structural consonances: in both cases a person gets trapped into the 'belly' of a container, be it a living or an inanimate one (the word *pancia*, Italian for 'belly', is consistently used by Pirandello to indicate the empty

⁷ Dostoevsky, 'The Crocodile', in: *White Nights and Other Stories*, trans. by C. Garnett, Mineola, Dover, 2008 (henceforth abbreviated as 'The Crocodile'), p. 107.

space inside the jar); this generates a legal controversy between those who want to break the container (Ivan's wife and friend in 'The Crocodile', Zi' Dima himself in 'La giara') and the legitimate owner of the crocodile/jar, who opposes to that unless an expensive refund is provided. In both stories, the protagonist surprisingly makes himself comfortable inside the container, which places him in a position of superiority and unexpected popularity: Zi' Dima is cheered and celebrated all night by Lollò's farmers, while Ivan Matveitch becomes a public attraction at the Passage and starts envisioning himself as a radical intellectual ('I shall refute everything and be a new Fourier', 'The Crocodile', p. 120). Eventually, both Dima and Ivan make the most of the incident, albeit in different ways – Pirandello's character is released from the jar without having to pay a refund, while Ivan is ready to enjoy his newfound status as a celebrity and shows no intention of leaving the crocodile.

Notably, Dima and Ivan are both defined as 'prisoners' on several occasions in their respective stories: 'Imprigionato, imprigionato lì, nella giara da lui stesso sanata' (NA III, p. 11); 'Don Lollò doveva subito liberare il prigioniero' (*ivi*, p. 13); "'I am going to see the poor prisoner". "Yes, now he is a prisoner!... Ah, that's what comes of thoughtlessness!"' ('Crocodile' ...). In a typically Pirandellian fashion, captivity turns Dima into a philosopher of sorts, or a wise fool – in other words, an *umorista*: 'Zi' Dima s'era calmato, non solo, ma aveva preso gusto anche lui alla sua bizzarra avventura e ne rideva con la gajezza mala dei tristi' [Uncle Dima had calmed down to the point that he had started to enjoy his strange adventure and was laughing with that twisted kind of glee that sad people have]. As prescribed by *umorismo*, Dima learns how to be *in tristitia hilaris*;⁸ his serenity contrasts with the raging fury of Don Lollò, who 'parve volesse impazzire' [looked like he was going to go crazy] (NA III, p. 7). The symbolic role assigned to imprisonment in Pirandello's fiction will be discussed in more detail in the next section; for the time being, suffice it to recall that in the eponymous essay, the link between prison and *umorismo* is addressed by Pirandello both implicitly (Socrates, the first humorist) and explicitly (Cervantes):

S'era armato cavaliere come il suo Don Quijote [...]; poi, da esattore, truffato, non va forse a finire in prigione? E dov'è questa prigione? Ma lì, proprio lì nella Mancha! In un'oscura e rovinosa carcere della Mancha, nasce il Don Quijote. [...] Lì, nell'oscura carcere della Mancha, egli si riconosce, egli si vede finalmente; si accorge che i giganti eran molini a vento e l'elmo di Mambrino un vil piatto da barbiere.⁹

[He had become a knight like his Don Quijote; then as a taxman he was swindled, and didn't he end up in jail? And where is this jail? No less than in La Mancha! In a dark and ramshackle prison in La Mancha, Don Quijote was born. There, in that dark La Mancha prison, Cervantes recognized himself, saw himself at last; he realized that the giants were just windmills, and that Mambrino's helm was a trivial barber's basin.]

Likewise, Dostoevsky's Ivan Matveitch seems to enjoy a state of philosophical illumination from the inside of the crocodile:

'You have only to creep into a secluded corner or into a crocodile, to shut your eyes, and you immediately devise a perfect millennium for mankind. When you went away this afternoon I set to work at once and have already invented three systems, now I am preparing the fourth. It is true that at first one must refute everything that has gone before, but from the crocodile it is so easy to refute it; besides, it all becomes clearer, seen from the inside of the crocodile'. [...]

'My friend, and freedom?' I asked, wishing to learn his views thoroughly. 'You are, so to speak, in prison, while every man has a right to the enjoyment of freedom'. [...]

⁸ Pirandello, *L'umorismo*, cit., p. 791.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 880.

‘Hold your tongue and listen!’ he squealed, vexed at my interrupting him. “Never has my spirit soared as now”. (‘The Crocodile’, pp. 123-124)

Dostoevsky’s perspective on his character, however, is quite different from Pirandello’s. While Zi’ Dima is indeed one of the several embodiments of the *umorista* archetype, Ivan Matveitch is actually a satirical figure, whose arrogance and intellectual pretentiousness are openly ridiculed by the author; more precisely, ‘The Crocodile’ has often been read as a satire of socialist thinker Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who wrote his famous novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) during his confinement at the Fortress of St. Peter and Paul.¹⁰ Whether we follow this interpretation or not, Ivan’s ambition to become the ‘new Fourier’ from the crocodile’s belly is used by Dostoevsky as a metaphor for any philosophical system that is not grounded in a direct contact with reality, but is rather based on abstract idealizations.

In short, as mentioned before, we are dealing with an atypical case in the broader framework of the intertextual relationship between Pirandello and Dostoevsky: Ivan is quite far from the multi-faceted complexity of characters like Myshkin, Stavrogin or Raskolnikov, and does by no means represent an ‘opposition’ between the Self and society; on the contrary, he is rather meant to embody a widespread (ridiculous) social type, i.e. the kind of lofty and pompous intellectual often ridiculed by Dostoevsky. Nonetheless, ‘La giara’ builds on this relatively unusual Dostoevskian source and takes it in a distinctively Pirandellian direction, as is the case with the other more conventional Dostoevskian echoes in *Novelle per un anno*. In the next section I will focus on this process of re-functionalization of the source, by highlighting the features that make ‘La giara’ a typically Pirandellian text. Particular attention will be given to two aspects, namely 1) the *topos* of reclusion as the symptom of an ambivalent attitude towards civilization, and 2) Pirandello’s unorthodox representation of legal disputes.

Pirandello’s prisoners

The semantic area of imprisonment, which was mentioned above with specific regard to ‘La giara’, is actually ubiquitous in the *Novelle per un anno*. It can manifest itself in a physical way, in the form of places in which characters are forced to live against their will: such is the case, for instance, with the protagonist of ‘Leonora, addio!’ (1910), ‘imprigionata nella più alta casa del paese’ [imprisoned in the highest house of the town] by her jealous husband (NA II, p. 571); or, to a less literal extent, with Mr Bareggi in ‘Fuga’ (1923), whose family obligations are symbolized by the rusty jail-like gratings and fencing wires outside the windows of his house (‘grate arrugginite’, ‘una rete di fil di ferro’, NA I, p. 441). On the other hand, a sense of imprisonment can also be conveyed through other kinds of bodily constraint, such as paralysis (‘La toccatina’, 1906) or – less drastically, and perhaps most famously – a tight waistcoat (‘Marsina stretta’, 1901). Lastly, Pirandello often uses this semantic area as a metaphor for the constraints imposed by social norms and duties:

Noi tutti siamo esseri presi in trappola, staccati dal flusso che non s’arresta mai, e fissati per la morte. (‘La trappola’, 1912, NA I, p. 777)

[We are all entrapped beings, separated from the endless flux, and fixed for death.]

Tutti i suoi doveri [...] stavano come irsute sentinelle a guardia del reclusorio della sua coscienza. Da circa venti anni, egli vi stava carcerato, a scontare un delitto che, in fondo, non aveva recato male se non a lui. (‘Il coppo’, 1912, NA I 673; emphasis added)

¹⁰ Cf. K. Lantz, ‘The Crocodile’, in: idem, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia*, London, Greenwood, 2004, pp. 76-77.

[All his duties stood like irritating sentinels guarding the prison of his conscience. For about twenty years he had been locked up in this prison to pay for a crime that, after all, had harmed no one but himself.]

Quello che hai fatto resta, come una prigionia per te. [...] E come puoi più liberarti? Come potrei io nella prigionia di questa forma non mia [...] accogliere e muovere una vita diversa, una mia vera vita? ('La carriola', 1917, NA III 559; e.a.)

[What you have done remains like a prison for you [...]. How can you then free yourself from it? How can I embrace and initiate a different life, a life truly mine, when I am imprisoned in this form which is not mine?]

'La giara' clearly belongs to this vast corpus of short stories about imprisonment. To be more precise, it is part of a specific sub-category where the protagonist cannot (or chooses not to) evade from his/her prison, but rather welcomes his/her confined status; as consequence, conviction becomes a paradoxical form of freedom, i.e. a shelter from the real prison that is ordinary life. This is the strategy followed by Biagio Speranza ('La Signora Speranza', 1903) and by Perazzetti ('Non è una cosa seria', 1910), who both get married in jest 'per guardarsi dal pericolo di prendere moglie' [to avoid the danger of having a wife]; likewise, Chiàrchio ('La patente', 1911) refuses to deny the rumours accusing him of bringing bad luck, and makes himself comfortable with the social confinement caused by his bad reputation. The impossibility of changing one's material condition is even more evident in other stories: in 'La toccatina' (1906), Beniamino Lenzi and Cristoforo Golisch overcome the trauma of their paralysis by laughing at it; something analogous happens to Dima in 'La giara' (1909), who ends up enjoying his own reclusion rather than trying to break away from it. It is worth noting that, in the eponymous volume where it was originally published, 'La giara' was immediately followed by 'La cattura' [The capture, 1918], a story based on a similar pattern – after being captured by a group of bandits, Guarnotta humoristically adapts to his captivity, and relishes his newfound, paradoxical freedom:

Quanto gli era occorso non era poi per lui tutta quella sciagura che in principio gli era apparsa [...]. Morto com'era già per tutti, restava vivo solo per essi, vivo e con tutto il peso di quella vita inutile, di cui egli ora, in fondo, si sentiva liberato. (NA III, p. 33)

[What had happened to him was not as bad as he thought, after all. Dead as he was to everyone else, he was still alive only to his kidnappers – alive and with the burden of his useless former life, from which he now felt relieved.]

All the characters in this sub-category share an ascetical inclination: they all distance themselves from the material needs and commitments of everyday life, and reach a state of philosophical superiority thanks to their anomalous condition – be it physical paralysis, entrapment in a jar, being kidnapped by bandits, or just being socially marginalized for one's bad reputation. As exemplified by Guarnotta in 'La cattura' ('dead as he was to everyone else'...), the status of these peculiar prisoners is somewhat suspended between life and death: just like the late Mattia Pascal or Vitangelo Moscarda at the end of their respective novels, they live in a sort of limbo, where they can escape the burden of being 'alive' in the conventional sense – as long as Dima is happily confined in his jar, he does not have to comply with Don Lollò's greedy requests. By taking shelter in a terracotta container, Dima turns away from his bodily, material existence, and the prosaic obligations that come with it; not by chance, when Lollò offers him 'pane e companatico' [bread and dripping], he seems to refuse ('non ne volete? Buttatelo ai cani!' [you don't want it? Give it to the dogs then!], NA III, p. 12). Incidentally, the Latin word for a terracotta jar is *testa* (Italian for 'head'), which ties in well with the cerebral nature typical of Pirandellian ascetism:

‘càzzica, che testa!’ [oh my, what a hard head!], says Lollò in response to the repairman’s stubbornness (NA III, p. 9).

In other words, almost paradoxically, Dima’s voluntary imprisonment is at the same time a regressive process (a *regressus* to the ‘belly’ of the jar), and one of sublimation from corporeality to only being a *testa* – an ascetic, disembodied presence. Radical detachment from life, after all, is a fundamental component of the ‘filosofia del lontano’ [philosophy of distance] that lies at the basis of *umorismo*, as illustrated in short stories such as ‘Pallottoline!’ (1902), ‘Rimedio: la geografia’ (1920) and ‘La tragedia di un personaggio’ (1911), where the expression originally comes from. This death-in-life condition typical of the *umorista* is often disturbingly close to suicide – significantly, several characters in the *Novelle per un anno* choose to end their lives as a way to escape the prison of their lives: see for instance ‘Sole e ombra’ (1896), ‘E due!’ (1901), ‘L’uccello impagliato’ (1910), ‘Il viaggio’ (1910), ‘Canta l’epistola’ (1911), ‘L’imbecille’ (1912), ‘Il coppo’ (1912), ‘Da sé’ (1913), ‘Scialle nero’ (1922), ‘Pubertà’ (1926), and ‘Un’idea’ (1934). In short, the *Novelle per un anno* display a broad range of perspectives on the idea of civilized life as a prison: on the optimistic end, the character manages to escape through humoristic reflection (‘Fuoco alla paglia’, ‘Quando s’è capito il giuoco’, and many others) or creatively transforms his/her conviction into a shelter from the outside world (‘La giara’); on the pessimistic end, the escape from reality takes the shape of madness (‘Nel gorgo’, ‘La distruzione dell’uomo’) or of suicide. This oscillation reflects what could be defined, borrowing and adapting Gregory Bateson’s terminology, as a *double bind* towards civilization, i.e. a dilemma between two equally undesirable scenarios: on the one hand, the Pirandellian subject feels imprisoned and suffocated by the ‘marsina stretta’ [tight waistcoat] of civilization, and adopts various strategies to break away from it; on the other, there is a lingering fear that what lies beyond social conventions is not actually freedom, but rather something closer to madness and death.¹¹

Such an ambivalence is also related to another specific aspect, which is central in ‘La giara’ as well as in several other texts by Pirandello – namely the problematic attitude towards the Law. As discussed above, ‘The Crocodile’ and ‘La giara’ revolve around a legal dispute between two parties, which is defined in both cases as new and unprecedented: ‘It is a very unusual accident in itself [...]. It is a suspicious accident, quite unheard of. Unheard of, above all; there is no precedent for it’, says Timofey Semyonitch – a colleague of both Ivan and the narrator’s – when asked for a juridical opinion (‘The Crocodile’, p. 113); likewise, according to Don Lollò, his litigation with Dima is a “caso nuovo, caro mio, che deve risolvere l’avvocato!” [a new case, one that my lawyer will have to handle] (NA III 11). This convergence points towards Pirandello’s and Dostoevsky’s shared interest in a fundamental feature of the short story as a genre, i.e. its predisposition to representing a singular, unheard-of event (Goethe’s ‘unerhörte Begebenheit’);¹² the subtitle of Dostoevsky’s story, after all, is ‘An extraordinary incident’, while at the very beginning of Pirandello’s story the uniqueness of the jar is explicitly highlighted by the narrator (‘una giara così non s’era mai veduta’ [the likes of that jar had never been seen before], NA III, p. 6). However, both authors take this pattern in a distinctly legal direction; this is especially the case with Pirandello, as confirmed by Lollò’s obsession with lawsuits – ‘con chi non

¹¹ On the obsessive presence of madness in Pirandello’s work (and its thematic link with death), cf. once again Gioanola, *Pirandello, la follia*. On the notion of ‘double bind’ cf. in particular G. Bateson, ‘Double Bind’ [1969], in: idem, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago University Press, 2000, pp. 271-278.

¹² Cf. J. P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, 29 January 1827. The link between the short story and strange, ‘unheard-of’ events is also stressed by Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel* (1911): ‘the short story [is] the narrative form which pin-points the strangeness and ambiguity of life’ (G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by A. Bostok, Cambridge, MIT, 1971, p. 51).

l'attaccava Don Lollò Zirafa? Per ogni nonnulla [...] gridava che gli sellassero la mula per correre in città a fare gli atti' [was there anyone Don Lollò Zirafa didn't pick a fight with? Over every little thing, he would ask for his mule and run to the city to press charges] (NA III, p. 5) –, and by the presence of an actual lawyer in the story (by contrast, Timofey Semyonitch is a government official, not an attorney).

Once again, Pirandello reinterprets the basic narrative structure of 'The Crocodile' in the light of his own *topoi* and recurring patterns. Legal disputes are actually a frequent feature in the *Novelle per un anno*: suffice it to mention 'Il tabernacolo' (1903), where the carpenter Spatolino goes to court in order to collect his pay for a tabernacle he had built, after the death of the man who commissioned it; or 'La morta e la viva' (1910), where Nino Mo is faced with a choice between remaining married to his second wife or to his first wife (whom he believed dead, until her unexpected return). In this kind of story, the protagonist usually tries to avoid the consequences of a (possible) unfavorable verdict by symbolically placing himself beyond the Law: Zi' Dima takes shelter in the jar, therefore entering a legal limbo of sorts, where he is free to ignore Don Lollò's claims; likewise, Nino Mo chooses to bypass the injunctions of the civil registry office, and keeps being a bigamist ("e che ci ho da fare io, se Dio permette così?" [what can I do about it, if God allows it?], NA III, p. 91). A less successful attempt is portrayed in 'Il tabernacolo' – when the court turns down Spatolino's rightful request, the carpenter occupies the tabernacle in protest and stands there like a 'statue of Christ', exposing himself to public ridicule:

Spatolino, impazzito, s'era impostato da statua di Cristo alla colonna, là, nel tabernacolo nuovo [...]. Lo tentarono con la fame; lo tentarono con la paura, con lo scherno; invano. Finalmente lo lasciarono tranquillo, come un povero matto che non faceva male a nessuno. [...] Spatolino si scosta dalla fronte la corona di spine, a cui già s'è abituato, e – grattandosi lì, dove le spine gli han lasciato il segno – con gli occhi invagati, si rimette a fischiettare: 'Fififi... fififi... fififi...' (NA I, p. 106)

[Spatolino went crazy, and was posing like a statue of Christ at the column, there in the new tabernacle. They tempted him with hunger, with fear, with derision; but in vain. Finally they left him alone, like a poor madman who didn't hurt anyone. Spatolino moves his crown of thorns away from his forehead; he has already grown accustomed to it. He scratches where the thorns left their mark, and resumes whistling with enraptured eyes: – Fififi... fififi... fififi...]

Spatolino well exemplifies the pessimistic end in the various possible outcomes of the conflict between Pirandello's characters and the Law: resisting or questioning the rule of law can lead to a state of superior freedom (as with Zi' Dima and Nino Mo), but also to insanity ('like a poor madman').

This particular aspect of Pirandello's ambivalence towards social constraints and institutions can be analyzed in relation to the growing field of Law and Literature studies, with particular regard to Desmond Manderson's recent work on modernism and the questioning of legal certainty. In his article 'Modernism, Polarity, and the Rule of Law' (2012), Manderson focuses on another modernist author, namely D.H. Lawrence: in Lawrence's novel *Kangaroo* (1922), the flux of reality generates a conflict or 'polarity' between the Law's 'predictable rules' and life's 'unpredictable circumstances', which leads to the unavoidable imperfection of all legal decisions. According to Manderson, however, the modernist questioning of juridical certainty does not necessarily coincide with an irrational, radical confutation of the rule of law; on the contrary, it can be an opportunity to rethink the Law and its application as an endless process, where 'legal decisions prefigure not an end to interpretative and normative disagreement, but another text to be defended and transformed in the flux of their ceaseless oscillation' – in other words, the Law is not supposed to 'maximize

certainty' anymore, but rather to 'manage uncertainty'.¹³ Pirandello's position in this respect is at the same time typically modernist,¹⁴ and more pessimistic than the one outlined by Manderson; in his works the Law is constantly represented as a stiff, crystallized form, one that can never be made to coincide with life's constant flux. This pattern, of course, is also quite frequent in Pirandello's novels and plays: the most obvious examples are *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904), *Così è (se vi pare)* (1917) and *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1925), where the fluid identity of the respective protagonists variously escapes the rigid definition imposed by the civil registry. The polarity between life and the Law is rather framed by Pirandello, once again, in terms of a double bind: on the one hand, the subject tries to release him/herself from the clutches of the Law; on the other, such an attempt implies a detachment from reality that can become disturbingly close to madness (Spatolino) or death (Mattia Pascal's death-in-life in the Miragno library, Vitangelo Moscarda 'dying every day' in the final chapter of *Uno, nessuno e centomila*).

As already stated above with regard to imprisonment, 'La giara' represents the euphoric end of a broader spectrum of texts, pointing as a whole to an ambivalent attitude towards the conventions of civilized life. While Zi' Dima's paradoxical escape towards freedom through reclusion is a successful one, ending with a carnivalesque subversion of the reality principle embodied by Don Lollò, other texts (such as 'Il tabernacolo') reveal the disturbing aspects of the opposition between the Self and society. Looked at in this perspective, Pirandello's dialogue with Dostoevsky in 'La giara' is both unusual and typical: the original source text does not belong to the portion of Dostoevsky's corpus that Pirandello is normally most inspired by, but its basic structure is nonetheless reinterpreted in the light of Pirandello's most distinctive *topoi*. The theme of imprisonment and the hero's unconventional response to a legal dispute allow us to situate 'La giara' within a large constellation of Pirandellian texts, revolving around a double-bind predicament that is equally central in Dostoevsky's most famous works – the impossibility of living freely either within or without the compass of modern bourgeois civilization.

¹³ D. Manderson, 'Modernism, Polarity, and the Rule of Law', in: *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, 2 (2012), pp. 503 and 477.

¹⁴ On the notion of modernism with regard to early 20th-century Italian literature (and Pirandello in particular), cf. for instance: R. Donnarumma, *Gadda modernista*, Pisa, ETS, 2006, pp. 7-28; V. Baldi, *Reale invisibile: mimesi e interiorità nella narrativa di Pirandello e Gadda*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2010; R. Luperini and M. Tortora (eds), *Sul modernismo italiano*, Napoli, Liguori, 2012.

Keywords

Pirandello, Dostoevsky, modernism, imprisonment, law and literature

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RIASSUNTO

‘Caso nuovo, che deve risolvere l’avvocato!’

Echi dostoevskiani nella *Giara* di Pirandello

La prima parte di questo articolo si fonda su un confronto intertestuale tra due novelle: *La giara* di Pirandello (1909) e *Il coccodrillo* di Dostoevskij (1865). La somiglianza strutturale tra i due testi è notevole: in entrambi i casi, il protagonista rimane accidentalmente intrappolato nella ‘pancia’ di un recipiente (animato in Dostoevskij, inanimato in Pirandello); l’imprevisto dà origine a una disputa legale tra il prigioniero o chi ne rappresenta gli interessi da una parte, e il proprietario della giara o del coccodrillo dall’altra. Il proprietario viene tuttavia spiazzato dal comportamento del protagonista, che in tutti e due i racconti sembra trovarsi perfettamente a suo agio nella nuova condizione di recluso. Dopo aver discusso le analogie tra la vicenda di Zi’ Dima e quella di Ivan Matveič, l’articolo passa ad esaminare *La giara* sulla base di alcuni *topoi* ricorrenti nell’opera pirandelliana: particolare attenzione viene dedicata ai temi della prigionia e del diritto, la cui declinazione da parte di Pirandello riflette un atteggiamento ambivalente nei confronti delle istituzioni civili. In questo senso, il dialogo intertestuale in atto nella *Giara* è al tempo stesso anomalo e altamente rappresentativo: da una parte, infatti, *Il coccodrillo* è un racconto satirico, lontano dagli aspetti della narrativa di Dostoevskij ai quali Pirandello dimostra altrove di essere più interessato; dall’altra, la rilettura compiuta nella *Giara* si collega di fatto a un tema fondamentale in entrambi gli autori, ossia la tensione inconciliabile tra libertà individuale e convenzioni sociali.